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**SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE**

# Migrant Solidarity Work in Times of 'Crisis': Glasgow and the Politics of Place

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Since 2015, new forms of migrant solidarity work emerged in Glasgow, spurred in part by refugee flows into Europe. Yet, for many organisations, much of their work has not changed since 2000, when the government began dispersing asylum seekers around the UK. Using histories and memories of place as an analytical lens, we examine solidarity work since the 2015 'crisis' as well as over the longer term. In our analysis, the 'crisis' is not a critical juncture but understood within a broader spatio-temporal context. This raises interesting questions regarding how history and memory are animated in the present, and when and what kinds of solidarity work emerge. In conversation with two community-led organisations in Glasgow, we suggest that as tropes of crisis and hierarchies of deservingness manifest around Europe, solidarity efforts can create spaces of resistance by drawing on a politics of place and recognizing the constructed nature of crises.

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**Keywords:** Glasgow; Refugees; Solidarity; Crisis; Memory

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## Introduction

In March 2019, Frans Timmermans, the European Commission's vice president said, 'Europe is no longer experiencing the migration crisis we lived in 2015, but structural problems remain' (European Commission 2019). Politicians and the media largely conceptualized the 2015 migration flows as a crisis in terms of the number of people arriving in Europe. Within this framework, the implicit solution to the 'crisis' was a reduction in arrivals. Yet, despite the lower number of arrivals, politicians and policymakers continue to use a crisis narrative, associating migrants with socio-economic, cultural, and security threats.

In the UK, other 'crises' have emerged linked to migration. Racism increased in the wake of the Brexit referendum, won on a campaign centred around migration (Goodfellow 2019). The Windrush Scandal involved Afro-Caribbeans, resident in the UK for many decades, being detained and in many cases deported, revealing the violence embedded in the hostile environment policy that pre-dated the so-called 'migration crisis' (de Noronha 2019). Indeed, whilst many in the UK were confronting the humanitarian crisis on Europe's borders, seeking to show and enact solidarity, the UK government passed into law the 2016 Immigration

Act—arguably its most regressive and punitive legislation on immigration to date—to muted public protest. This follows a long succession of racialised and classed bordering practices, from the Aliens Act of 1905, aimed at Jews, to the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act targeting British citizens from the Indian sub-continent, to a raft of legislation from 1994 aimed at keeping those deemed undesirable and undeserving away and making life in the UK increasingly hostile (e.g. Solomos 1989; Miles 1993; Goodfellow 2019).

Since 2015, with anti-immigrant populism on the rise and continuing proclamations of migrant crises across Europe, how do people, whether citizens or non-citizens, act in solidarity with newcomers? How does crisis rhetoric shape forms of activism and solidarity on the ground? This paper is a collaborative effort to think through these questions around 'crisis', solidarity, and the politics of place in conversation with two activists from community-led organisations, who are at the frontline of advocacy work in Glasgow.

We argue that as tropes of crisis and hierarchies of deservingness manifest around Europe, some solidarity efforts work to create spaces of resistance and to effect structural change, drawing on a politics of place and recognizing the constructed nature of crises and the continuities there within. By referring to politics of place, we lean on longstanding concerns about whether 'concrete geographical and historical circumstances... can be understood as expressions of abstract social relations' (Keith & Pile 1993). As we go on to suggest, this 'politics of place' need not be 'real', or at least not entirely so, but can be both imagined and largely symbolic. Thus crises, even of the everyday variety, are seen through this prism. We draw on the work of Agustín and Jørgensen (2019: 25), who define solidarity as produced from below, expanding a sense of community, and moving beyond borders. As they argue, solidarity is contentious, inventive of new imaginaries, and generative of political subjectivities and collective identities.

While they focus on how solidarity is relational and spatial, here we add another element and examine the temporal as well as spatial aspects of solidarity to help understand how history and memory are put to work in Glasgow. We also explore forms of action and alliances that emerge across time and space in a wider context shifting between anti-immigration rhetoric and 'refugees welcome' responses. As Featherstone (2012: 6) argues, '...[Solidarities] produce new ways of configuring political relations and spaces.'

Spatially, we are interested in how crisis rhetoric focuses attention on the external borders of the UK and Europe, defining who is deserving of help, and how the impulse to help refugees 'over there' intersects with solidarity work with migrants in Glasgow, a city with a two-decades' long history of struggles to support refugees. In the absence of large-scale arrivals witnessed in Europe in 2015, the focus of the 'refugees welcome' movement in Glasgow combines longstanding support for those already here with newer forms of solidarity aimed at helping 'deserving refugees' on the trail. Indeed, the local level analysis in this article re-focuses our attention not on the spectacular but instead on the ongoing crises deeply embedded in our societies that affect citizens and non-citizens alike. As Vigh (2008) points out, crisis can become the context and thus is endemic rather than episodic. It is this very continuity that we seek to address, with the long-term imposition of 'extraordinary' measures against migrants (Bigo 2002) that, in the Glasgow context, date back two decades.

### **Collaborative Conversations about Solidarity and Crisis**

We view solidarity as a practice that is shaped by and connected to people, memory, time, and place. In Glasgow, solidarity as practice is part of the cityscape, and like crisis, is often framed not as episodic but endemic, central to the city's understanding of itself. Conceptual and practical debates about solidarity have in part emerged from the 'refugees welcome' movements in 2015 that were largely, but not exclusively, led by civil society (Agustín & Jørgensen

2016: 4). In Glasgow and elsewhere, these movements predate 2015 and are tied to a specific socio-political context. Collectively, they challenged a hegemonic border regime that seemed impermeable (Agustín & Jorgensen 2016: 225).

In writing this paper, we explored these ideas in conversation with two individuals working with different migrant populations: Ruth Lamb, the Groups Co-ordinator/Development Worker at Govan Community Project (GCP), and Selina Hales, the founder of Refuweege, both organisations we have worked with in different capacities since 2004. GCP and Refuweege reflect different yet interrelated histories of the city that speak to our collective interest in crisis, solidarity, continuity, and change. Our conversations are with Selina and Ruth as collaborative contributors to this paper which centres the experiences of their respective organisations in navigating 'crisis' rhetoric and the politics of place. As such, we regard their voices as offering one set of particular insights that shape our collective understandings of solidarity as a practice. These conversations build on the field workshops that we participated in as part of the 'Helping Hands' network, where, between 2017 and 2018, we visited around 20 migrant solidarity initiatives in Copenhagen, Nijmegen, Glasgow, and Hamburg (cf. Sandberg & Andersen, SI Introduction).<sup>1</sup>

Formerly Govan & Craigton Integration Network, Govan Community Project is a community-based organization in the south of Glasgow. Originally developed as a response of community and church members to the needs of newly arrived asylum seekers in the early 2000s, GCP is a local charity working with and for the diverse communities of the Greater Govan and Glasgow area. Their work involves weekly drop-ins, a foodbank, advice, information and advocacy, cultural events, a community flat, English classes, a destitution food project, hate-crime reporting, and an interpreting service.

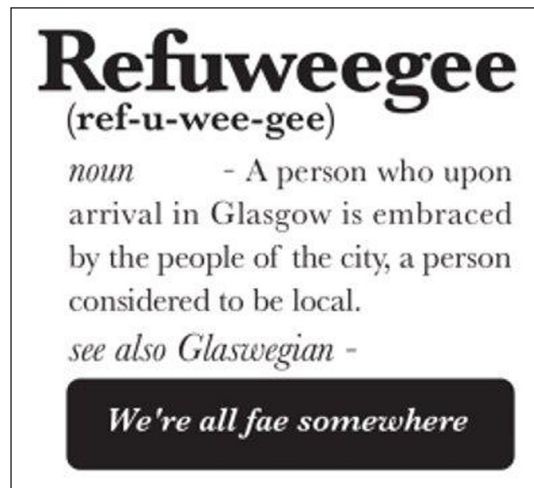
Whilst GCP's branding explicitly connects to Govan's local shipbuilding history—the background in **Image 1** is Fairfield's Shipyard in Govan—interestingly it inverts the narrative. Rather than a place most commonly defined by its lost, outward facing industrial past, today Govan is building something else, looking inwards to its own communities.

Selina Hales set up Refuweege in December 2015 to welcome forcibly displaced people arriving in Glasgow. Refuweege provides community-built, personal welcome packs through donations from the public, containing toiletries, Glasgow-themed items, and *letters fae the locals*, handwritten letters of welcome from the general public. Refuweege also runs a monthly pop-up where people can get a wide range of things from clothes to household goods. Underpinning their approach is a shared sense of place which extends to the city and engages with shared responsibility for 'city identities'. Refuweege's name comes from



**Image 1:** GCP website logo.

<sup>1</sup> In addition to our existing research relationships with GCP and Refuweege, we visited GCP as part of the Glasgow field workshop. The network, 'Helping Hands: Research Network on the Everyday Border Work of European Citizens', was funded by the Danish Research Council for Independent Research (DFF/6107-00111).



**Image 2:** Refuweegee logo.

combining 'refugee' with '*Weegee*', slang for somebody from Glasgow, as their logo explains in **Image 2**.

Doreen Massey's (2007) important discussion of 'place beyond place' focuses on place as heterogenous, fragmented, and complex. Place is not an expression of elements contained within a geographically bounded area, but ultimately a result of relational properties. In this same way, Refuweegee articulates a solidarity that reconfigures a politics of place, opening the city and connecting Glasgow to broader issues, here one of refugees arriving in Europe.

The decision to enter into conversation with both Ruth and Selina in this paper was shaped by their respective work at the frontline with refugees, people in the asylum process and migrants. Their perspectives reflect their personal experience and commitment, their practitioner knowledge of community work in Glasgow and different ways of drawing on traditions and histories of a specific locality as we discuss further below. This decision raises some methodological issues. For instance, there is a potential danger in reproducing an unthinking normative whiteness in our engagement with migrant solidarity. Emujulu and Bassel (2017) are critical of what they identify as a political racelessness typical of the entrepreneurial third sector in Scotland. In relation to minority women's activism, they suggest an exclusionary universalism is produced based on shared concerns around inequality that then erase race, gender, and legal status for the sake of a false unity based on class. As we shall go on to explore, the rhetoric of a socially inclusive and multicultural progressive politics in Scotland does have some currency with both Ruth and Selina; they draw on this to locate local solidarity. However, they also understand and frame their work in terms that recognise intersecting inequalities, importantly not at the expense of race, ethnicity, and legal status. Far from being hostile towards such discussions, in different ways they grapple with these very questions in their day-to-day work.

We also recognise the absence of migrant perspectives in our article. We decided to engage with Ruth and Selina because they are positioned to speak directly about how history, memory, and place shape their work and are activated and animated in the present. Beyond the scope of this paper is a more detailed presentation of both organisations that would allow us to explore the migrant experience within both organisations, including how people from migrant backgrounds shape these solidarities. Learning through lived experiences is one way to subvert political racelessness but not the only mechanism we can draw on. Ruth and Selina's contributions are vital to this paper; they reveal the extent to which far-flung border

sites at the edges of Europe fold into and shape understandings of and responses to 'crisis', local solidarity efforts and alliance building in unexceptional everyday moments and interactions. In order to locate their words, we turn first to how Europe and the UK have constructed and responded to the so-called 'migration crisis' at the external border.

### **Defining a 'Crisis', Locating a 'Crisis', Responding to a 'Crisis'**

A crisis may be defined as a sudden, alarming change (Mountz & Hiemstra 2014: 383) or a disruption to the norm of presumed stability (Roitman 2013: 4). Defining an event as a crisis, delimits possible responses, not least in terms of temporal horizons (e.g. Rosenthal et al. 1989: 10). Yet, as the New Keywords Collective have argued, 'regarding illegalized migration into and across Europe – the very distinction between (and separation of) what is ostensibly "stable" and "in crisis" is altogether tenuous' (Heller et al. 2016: 10). Indeed, some scholars have critically assessed the current moment in Europe as a crisis of governance (e.g. Crawley et al. 2017; cf. Vincenti 2018) and of the welfare state (Sandberg & Andersen, SI Introduction), rather than of migration; while others have analysed how 'crises' become an instrument of rule (Agamben 2013; Brassett & Vaughan-Williams 2012; Klein 2008; Mainwaring 2019). We share these critical stances and in this paper are interested in how proclamations of crisis at the European and national level intersect with solidarity work at the local level.

So-called 'migration crises' focus attention on the spectacular: on overcrowded boats crossing the Mediterranean, on deaths at sea, and on border walls and other militarized responses to some people's mobility. Within the EU, the 'migration crisis' also reinforces the focus on the external border as an important symbolic site for the contested politics of migration: in this narrative, boats crossing the Mediterranean Sea or border fences hastily constructed at the edges of Eastern European states are made hypervisible. Policies and rhetoric thus locate the 'problem' of migration and recurring migration 'crises' at the edges of Europe, emanating from an obscure yet threatening Third World (De Genova 2016; Mainwaring 2019). This focus detracts from the structural forces and European policies that encourage this migration, as well as the class inequality, poverty, and racism that continue to characterize 'receiving' societies. How does the focus on the spectacular fold into acts of solidarity within communities far from this physical and symbolic border? What form does 'crisis' take?

For us it's constant crisis. When people are coming in with children and suitcases and you're on the phone to the hospital because a woman can't get down a flight of stairs. Whatever is going on is immediate. It's happening now. Do, or did we, feel 'the washing up on the shore' stuff acutely here? No, we don't. But there is still that human tragedy that sprouts from the asylum process every day. It predates 2015.

Ruth, GCP

For Ruth, the crisis is decidedly unspectacular and ordinary. It is an everyday feature of working in Govan, a dispersal neighbourhood for people seeking asylum who arrive in the UK 'spontaneously', whose arrival is often framed as uncontrolled and chaotic and who are perceived as undesirable and undeserving.

People in the UK asylum system are subject to the policy of dispersal around the UK in order to receive government support. Dispersal is the forced relocation of people to identified dispersal sites, ostensibly to avoid 'overburdening' any one area. Glasgow is the largest dispersal 'region' in the UK and the only one in Scotland. Since 2001, Glasgow has been host to around 10% of overall UK asylum applicants and it now has among its population the vast majority of the 20,000 people in Scotland once identified as refugees. People who are dispersed are housed and supported by the Home Office while in the asylum process, though housing is sub-contracted and support amounts to just £37.75 per week per person, an amount that has



only increased in pennies since 2000. This level of support is widely recognised as leading to poverty and destitution.

Dispersal is not fixed but a fluid process; it is purposefully designed to disrupt over and over again, not just the packing up of belongings, but changing of schools and moving to wherever housing is available, often times to areas with no history of refugee dispersal and few integration services (Fraser & Piacentini 2014). As we shall go on to explore, this poses challenges for meeting needs and alliance building and can reproduce structural inequalities. This is the long-standing hostile environment in action in its unspectacular, everyday, banal, and un-talked-about form, which has long shaped the solidarity work of organisations like GCP. Then came the events of 2015.

The news was on in the background and there was a young baby in this report from the Hungarian border, and there was teargas and smoke and the dad couldn't work out whose face to wash first, his own or his tiny child. At that point I thought no, no, no, other people will be feeling this way too. And so I thought if I can do something, others can do something as well. I did not want to go away from my own family but thought we can do something here. And at that point, I had no idea. I didn't know Glasgow's landscape in terms of welcome refugees... I didn't know the numbers of people arriving, I didn't know what happened when people arrived... I had just put out the call on Twitter and Facebook for stuff for welcome packs, stuff for people already here. But yeah everyone was interested in Syria, so all the journalists were asking about Syrians, and I was like 'there are other people in Glasgow not just Syrians'. Then all the questions were like 'we want to meet Syrians'... It helped me decide at that point I didn't want to meet anybody, because I didn't want to be viewed by any of the organisations already working this field the way I was viewing those journalists.

Selina, Refuweegee

For many, the sense of crisis—both rhetoric and refugee arrivals—compelled them to respond by 'doing something'. In 2015, there was an unexpected surge of support in response to migrant arrivals in European cities, a DIY 'refugees welcome' solidarity movement (Piacentini 2016; Tazzioli & Walters 2019). Witnessed in Glasgow and across Europe, solidarity centred on various forms of direct action: loading of cars with supplies for makeshift refugee camps; fundraising activities for people on this trail; and public demonstrations of support.

Indeed, Selina's response follows a long-standing pattern, whereby in many refugee contexts around the world, local civil society actors—individuals, groups, communities, and NGOs—are the main providers of support and services to refugees. Whilst she reflects on her lack of knowledge of the asylum process in Glasgow, through improvisation Selina tapped into the significant resources, expertise, and support networks for engaging with newly arriving refugees in Glasgow. She scoped out possible alliances, whilst also explicitly connecting solidarity to enduring crises faced by many others in the city.

In contrast to civil society solidarity, the UK government's initial response to the 2015 'migration crisis' was to refuse to take part in any EU resettlement, while framing the 'problem' as being 'the Jungle' in Calais. Proximity matters both in terms of the government response but also, as we suggest later, in relation to how publics engage with the refugee question. Assumptions about pull factors—access to work, benefits, and the 'easy life'—have been the prism through which British policymakers, and subsequently much of the British public, have viewed refugee movements for over a quarter of a century (Mayblin 2016). This has within it the corollary that the removal of pull factors, such as access to public services and jobs, will discourage unwanted movement. Here again we have the hostile environment

at work: the UK government aims to prevent arrivals and remove access to public and private services for those who do arrive.

Despite the dehumanising reduction of people to swarms by former Prime Minister David Cameron (BBC 2015) and marauders by the former British Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond (BBC 2015b), the public reaction to the movement of thousands of people in search of safety in 2015 came as a surprise to UK politicians. After significant public pressure, the UK Government agreed to resettle 20,000 Syrians by 2020, having previously said they would take none. The Syrian Vulnerable Person Relocation Scheme was established and involved local authorities agreeing to resettle people. Thirty-one of Scotland's 32 local authorities agreed to resettle Syrian refugees. By early 2019, the UK had resettled 13,818 Syrians, 18.5% of them in Scotland, despite Scotland's population comprising only 8% of the UK total (BBC 2019).

This created a two-tiered system of entitlement to support, reinforcing a hierarchy of deservingness and narrow definition of 'genuine refugees': two Syrians from the same street can be treated very differently on the basis of how they arrived in the UK (Karyotis et al. 2020). For those not considered legitimate refugees, including most non-Syrians, things are even worse, with the culture of disbelief and suspicion prominent (Souter 2011). They are viewed as not deserving of state support, or indeed of the title 'refugee'. As Casati (2018) suggests, deservingness is dependent on both local and national context, while recent work reveals these contexts diverging in the Scottish and UK cases (Mulvey 2018).

Although immigration policy in Scotland is determined by Westminster, successive Scottish administrations have attempted to provide more humane responses to refugee movement, including a commitment to 'integration' from day of arrival, as opposed to beginning from refugee status determination. However, because immigration is a reserved matter for the UK government, Westminster, the hostile environment and hierarchies of deservingness cast a long shadow over Scotland and Glasgow's solidarity.

Given Glasgow's status as the top dispersal city in the UK, exploring the Glasgow context provides some opportunities for thinking through how we might reconnect a practice of solidarity for people 'over there', with solidarity for people 'coming here' or 'already here'—the latter a solidarity that is not determined by the gratitude of one party or some conception of who is and is not deserving. What solidarity means and how it is enacted is as varied as the actors who evoke it. In a city like Glasgow, history and place as a combined analytical lens offer particular insights. Can a focus on temporal and spatial aspects of solidarity help us to understand how history and memory are put to work in the present (Tazzioli & Walters 2019)? And what actions and alliances are reactivated or emerge in new form?

## Solidarity Work in Glasgow: History, Memory, Time, and Place

Is there something about Glasgow? I think it would be impossible to do what we do and not feel that. What we get to see, we get to see the bad side, but we get to see that totally open, welcoming, kind, proud city, every single day in the hundreds of letters<sup>2</sup> that come in. There is a sense of real pride of being friendly, of being part of this place of solidarity. I think it is really important.

Selina, Refuweegee

<sup>2</sup> Selina is talking here about the '*letters fae the locals*' campaign run by Refuweegee, whereby anyone can send a letter to a PO box number, welcoming new people to the city. The letters were added to Refuweegee welcome packs and distributed (see **Image 3**).

In Glasgow, the temporal and spatial aspects of solidarity work have deep significance. The stories told in the city around solidarity, radical politics, and workers' rights have a long history, often of mythical quality: the story of Mary Barbour, who led the rent strikes in the 1920s to the story of Jimmy Reid, leader of the Clyde Shipbuilders work-in, then Rector of Glasgow University. Arguably, Glasgow's story is one of solidarity, of community amid adversity, of Red Clydeside and tanks in George Square. However, as Smith (1984) highlights, this radicalism is but a part of the story. Before the First World War, Glasgow had a 'radical liberal' tradition, and according to Smith, this liberalism remained prominent as the city moved towards labourist politics. This has neutered much of the city's radicalism and has channelled politics into 'traditional' political structures. Navigating the pressure to be institutionalised within these structures to access funding whilst also crafting ways to push back against the state is a recurrent theme for organisations supporting migrants in Glasgow. Ruth describes it as keeping 'one foot in and one foot outwith'.

Nevertheless, we are able to trace and connect current migrant solidarity with a much wider and longer history of everyday social struggles and crises that have shaped the city (cf. Agustín & Jorgensen 2016: 227). There are many examples of powerful DIY activism. These include the famous 'Glasgow Girls' campaign at Drumchapel High School, a dispersal neighbourhood where teenaged school pupils campaigned against the Home Office on behalf of their disappearing fellow students; and the Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees that emerged in 2001 to improve the quality of life of asylum seekers and refugees with the backing of various trade unions, politicians from several parties, and huge numbers of local people. The Unity Centre, located near the UK Home Office's main Glasgow office—where people seeking asylum are expected to report either daily, weekly, or monthly—gives practical support to these people and other migrants in Scotland. Their collective action has resulted in substantial changes to the treatment of people seeking asylum in Scotland.

It is important of course to distinguish between the stories we tell ourselves, and the stories we would rather not tell. Glasgow is also a city with a history of inequalities, violence, and sectarianism, poverty, and ill health. As well as being the city that renamed the square housing the South African Embassy to Nelson Mandela Place during the apartheid era, the city profited greatly from the slave trade. It is a city with a long history of migration, of welcoming Polish migrants during World War II but also of anti-Irish racism. It is a city with a history of industrial struggle, but also one of racist violence, sometimes occurring simultaneously. So, while McLean, Gallacher, and Maxton are remembered, the race riot at the Broomielaw is largely erased from the city's history (Griffin 2015). It is a city where Firsat Dag, a Turkish asylum seeker, was murdered in 2001 in a racist attack, not long after the implementation of dispersal policy to some of the city's poorest areas. Glaswegians often note that 'We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns', expressing egalitarian sentiments, but racism is as much part of Glasgow's present as its past (Davidson et al. 2018) and cannot be presumed a 'settled matter' (Emujulu & Bassel 2017: 67). Kelliher (2018: 2) describes the collective memory of solidarity practices as 'how history continues to shape contemporary practices of solidarity'. Yet this history does not necessarily play out in straightforward ways and different parts of the stories emerge.

This question of place is interesting. In Govan, there is the history of grassroots activism. History is embedded. We tell ourselves about activism, but there are other histories too... not literally linked to migration but the BAE systems in Govan sending weapons across the world. What is the impact of that? All of that, it feels important. The history of the Pearce Institute where we're based is fascinating; Then there's Mary Barbour...

Ruth, GCP



How Glasgow retells its story can be understood through what Tazzioli and Walters (2019: 179) describe as the 'sedimented knowledges of political struggles as well as of solidarity practices'. These knowledges have tremendous power in solidarity narratives that emerge in Glasgow, though are less straightforward in terms of solidarity practices. It is no coincidence that much of the migrant solidarity action has emerged in areas of Glasgow that have a long history of local action around poverty, poor housing, and wide-ranging inequalities. These are often designated as dispersal neighbourhoods due to empty, poor-quality housing. The kinds of solidarity practices and horizontal alliances that have emerged draw on sedimented knowledges of struggle. Yet, the collective memory of a place and its connection to or history of solidarity—the kind of *Glesga activism*<sup>3</sup> Ruth speaks about below—is not solid terrain: it needs to be reactivated, renegotiated, reshaped, revisited, and reconfigured to meet challenges as they occur and recur over time. Analysing the temporal and spatial helps to capture and understand what is ephemeral and what is enduring about solidarity practices, but only tells part of the story of solidarity in action, as Ruth explains.

I'll start with the place. I think that in terms of the spatial aspects of where people are placed through dispersal, Govan is the initial accommodation area for asylum seekers and has the highest population of asylum seekers in the UK apparently. That's why the Govan and Craigton Integration Network was set up back in the early 2000s. It was a place-based approach before the Scottish Government were using that term. So people are placed in run-down tenement accommodation alongside people living in really low socio-economic conditions. Solidarity is kind of needed in the face of that, more so than in areas where people aren't placed. We (GCP) are there, but there's not really much support from the local community to migrant populations. Maybe there is that solidarity in the *closes* (a Scottish word for tenements) that we don't see, giving their neighbour sugar if you like, that kind of informal stuff might be going on, but there is a resistance from the local community. I don't want to completely generalise. There are local people involved; we've got local drivers for our food bank. But it's not the grassroots '*Glesga activism*'. It's people who have the time and resources. If you are in Govan and you are living on Foodbanks, you don't have the time and resources... There are great activists in Govan doing the work, but in the field of migration, I don't think it's happening so much. And then the austerity context shape things, all the time.

Ruth, GCP

There are important concerns regarding what constitutes being from a particular place, and it is important not to unwittingly reproduce questions around 'where are you really from?' aimed at many visible minorities. However, Ruth alludes to a context in which community activism has tended to be based around historic poverty, allied to a decade of austerity, such that an inability to meet basic needs among existing communities has contributed to a lack of capacity to make common cause with newer communities. This also ties into a previous point, that the labourist politics of the city have only recognised activism around socio-economic inequality. The question of who deserves help, however, is a universalist one, which accepts all people have troubles and all deserve better standards of living. There are other aspects and enactments of solidarity through the lens of place that Selina speaks about which have very specific effects.

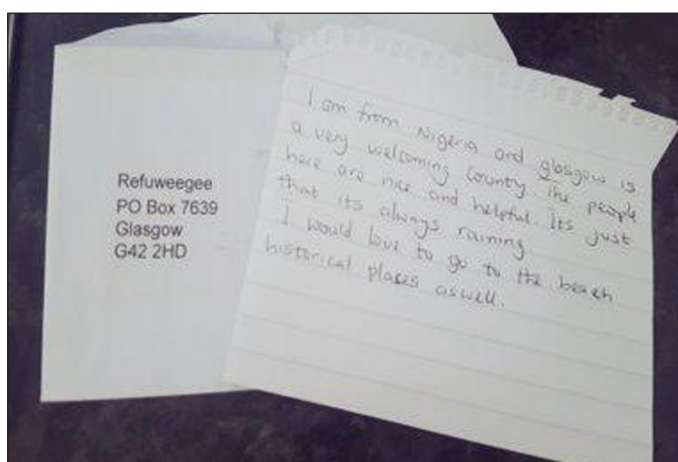
<sup>3</sup> *Glesga* is a slang term for Glasgow used by Glaswegians, so connotes an insiderness that also draws on real and mythologised memory of activism typical of the city.

I feel more uncomfortable with the word 'help' than I do with solidarity. Help is something done to you, I think you need. Whereas solidarity I see as standing with, as understanding, as doing together, it's much more of a shared experience than... a gifted experience. I see these as quite different things. The letter writing is a way of expressing solidarity, gives people the opportunity through words to stand with. And usually when we think of solidarity it is with the collective, letter writing offers solidarity to the person.

The slow process of letter writing to strangers (see **Image 3**) suggests the emergence of different forms of solidarity being enacted across the city. Arguably this is another form of 'arms-length' solidarity—and one that may extend more to new arrivals, those whose deservingness is at first assumed, with less attention, for example, to the large number of destitute asylum seekers in the city. Selina herself is explicit, Refuweegee was never 'just about the Syrians'. Moreover, it adopts a form of solidarity that draws on the very unspectacular format of letter writing. The content of the majority of these letters is about normalising life in the city based on the histories and memories of place of the letter writers themselves: their experience of the city (as Glaswegians or indeed non-Glaswegians), the weather, how to get around, which parks to go to, and where to find the cheap supermarkets. This is *their* solidarity. Whilst the spectre of Westminster and all the lived effects of hostile immigration policies may not loom large in the particular stories of the city written in the letters, it does feature in the solidarity work of organisations like GCP and Refuweegee.

### Solidarity Work on a Spectrum: Who Is It For? Can It Effect Change?

For long-standing groups involved in helping migrants, much of their work has not changed since 2000. The spectacle of the 2015 'migration crisis' created opportunities for more long-standing groups, like GCP, to perform both insider and outsider roles at the front line, providing support and influencing policy. In 2015, the Scottish Government created a Refugee Taskforce to co-ordinate Scotland's response to the humanitarian crisis arising from the conflict in Syria to sit alongside their refugee integration strategy, giving GCP and other groups a forum for critical dialogue with policymakers. As Ruth notes, this access to policymakers presents opportunities to be tactical regarding solidarity work, without accepting the state as a trusted interlocuter beyond critique:



**Image 3:** 'Letter from a local' ©Refuweegee.

Was it an explicit decision to be more political? Definitely with SERCO,<sup>4</sup> the conversations we were having, and the contacts Owen had with certain people, we were able to get data and work around that campaign. The Scottish government gave us some money and we were able to get a caseworker. That thing of one foot in, one foot out-with, this meant we were there at the demo protesting lock changes, but we were also having different conversations at a different level. Rupert Soames, the head of SERCO phoned up Owen to talk about it. And whilst Syria dispersal has been going on, people having been coming on boats, in the backs of lorries in fridges, that's what we deal with. This is people who are going through this process 2, 3, 4 times. They are either on £5 a day or nothing a day.

Organizations that responded directly to the 2015 'crisis', like Refuweek, have also reflected on their roles as the discourse of crisis has waned. Selina explained how they work with a discourse of humaneness and still connect it to change.

We can't decontextualize politics from acts kindness. It's the system. Yes, all the time we reflect. Welcome packs, buggies, footwear, cots, by plugging this gap we're not holding anyone to account. Nothing is gonna change; they are getting away with not providing this as an essential item and we're just plugging this gap and they're like (shrugs). It's really hard. So you need to humanise it. All the time. That experience on the ground? Yes, we need to direct that information to someone that can force that change at policy level, but right now we need to help that pregnant mum... Yes, we could spend all that energy fighting for structural change, but what happens to all the people who arrive with nothing, or people in a city who like me don't feel capable of structural change but do want to do something.

Ruth also reflected on the pervasiveness of structural inequalities that shaped her work. She struggled with the notion of dependency, while recognising structural causes that ensure that people need a helping hand.

How can you have solidarity with people who are being denied basic citizenship rights? They are not on the same playing level as you, you have to bring them up. But how do you do that? Is it not helping? Is it helping, or supporting or what? And people who are so dejected, the benefits system that degrades people so much, how do you build that solidarity? For me it is about help and helping up and solidarity. These forms have to co-exist, people sometimes need their hand held and sometimes it's about standing beside.

But can meeting immediate needs be uncoupled from addressing deep-rooted structural inequalities? Selina faced this head on, as well as Refuweek's own role in replicating problematic forms of 'benevolence', 'aid', and 'help' that can in fact reinforce dependency and feed into rhetoric about who deserves the most help.

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<sup>4</sup> SERCO is a multi-million private provider of public services, including housing to asylum seekers in the UK. In July 2018, it announced a rolling lock change eviction process for those denied refugee status in Glasgow. This resulted in city-wide protests led by a collective of housing tenants' association members in solidarity with asylum advocacy organizations like GCP and Refuweek.

The pop-up event we run in Kinning Park and Garnethill every month, we want to give people the option to choose their stuff, freedom, not to be just getting handouts. It was created with the best of intentions for newly arrived people and people who've been here for a long time but it's open to everyone and we advertise via homeless networks as well. No questions asked; whoever comes through the door gets access the same way as everyone else would. But after 3, 4, 5 events, it changed, it shifted into... an absolute rammy (Scottish slang for a 'brawl'). There's no other way to describe it. We created this sort of front line, a distribution line, of people coming and being unable to identify between need and want, and unable to have conversations and it built up like that for a little while until we cancelled, we shut down one event. I had a proper moment afterwards. What had we done? I wasn't comfortable with that sort of aid distribution (in camps). And after that event I sat back and I thought, we've created that exact situation here. We're no better than there, we put ourselves on the peg of being welcoming and open and we're not.

Selina hints at a tendency to demarcate which populations you make common cause with and which you do not. The question then arises, who is solidarity for in such cases? The solidarity organisations in Glasgow promote the universality of deserving a decent life in the face of deep structural inequalities, whilst recognising the intersecting nature of immigration status and ways that national borders condition much of this activity by, for example, stratifying the rights of populations that these organisations work with.

### **Alliance Building from Across and Below**

In Glasgow, one response to some of these tensions has been alliance building. We can trace parallels between grassroots responses and the creation of 'spaces of survival' (Sivanandan 1990) in a number of contexts that aim to trouble the status quo and tackle inequalities faced by refugees and asylum seekers. In similar terms, Milner (2011: 322) describes the situation in Calais and argues that 'an ethos of solidarity (as opposed to hospitality) is shown to open new avenues for collaboration and engagement, by attending to such moments of disruption, rather than reinforcing specific representations of the outsider.'

For organisations like GCP, the effects of the UK's dispersal policy and its constant uprooting provided precisely the opportunities for new forms of collaborative solidarity work and alliance building through sharing knowledge, as Ruth explains here:

People come to Govan for a few weeks, then they are placed in Shettleston, then they are placed elsewhere. I had a conversation with the head teacher of Ibrox Primary, she was saying 'What's happening? We're getting these kids in, they're getting enrolled, then they are getting moved. What's going on?' I explained dispersal to her and worked with other partners to explain this process. You've got professionals and big institutions working with people being moved to the city; dispersal is a moving picture. People are in transit for however long they come to the UK and then when they get here, they are still in transit because they're being moved from pillar to post.

Indeed, GCP's solidarity work reveals how institutions responsible for the provision of social goods are designed for a sedentary population. Those forcibly made mobile through dispersal then come to be neglected and marginalised. As has been argued elsewhere (Piacentini 2014; Fraser & Piacentini 2014), the creation of community organisations and participation in networks and groups in parts of Glasgow since 2000, and reactivated again since 2015, serve multiple functions. They are not only practices of emplacement and inclusion and of meeting everyday needs, they also represent new opportunities for people in those communities,

collectively and individually, as well as for organisations working with communities to activate and enact other forms of solidarity. Ruth explained:

Working with other organisations has developed into other forms of work like networks of solidarity. Fiona, the head teacher at Ibrox Primary, has been really welcoming. We had a homework club there for kids whose first language is not English. We piloted it at Ibrox primary. We had an information evening for parents, and it developed. It's in Moss Heights, in Cardonald and again its history and place. These were the new flats, built in the 1950s, state-of-the-art, everyone wanted to live there, just White families. And now, it's not asylum seekers living there but refugees from all over, living alongside really socially and economically disadvantaged White Scots. All in the one area and that's where we have our community flat. Before 2015, it was the 'wee ethnic minority club', then we had Syrian families move into the area, who had their refugee status, they were part of the quota dispersal. We weren't directly working with them in the office, but their kids were coming to the homework club. And there was lots of tension between Scottish families who had nothing, 'Why are they coming into our area?' Through the homework club in the past three years things changed. It's a lovely environment, and it's mainly all primary age kids from the flats. You've got all backgrounds, the Syrians, Pakistani kids whose parents migrated here in the 1980s, Scottish kids. It's not overt youth work. It's based on those principles, the funding application was written in such a way that it was learning in a non-formal environment, so they are bringing their homework but it's a safe place. Standard community development work but not formally saying that it is. It's a way of resisting. Our work is informed by the principles we believe in, but it's not institutionalised or limited by those structures. I think that's why the kids like it.

Immigration features strongly in the tales of the city, of declining neighbourhoods and transformation. Any tendency to focus on post-Brexit racism as a new phenomenon risks erasing people's long endured experiences of, and resistance to, everyday and institutionalised racism and anti-immigrant sentiment (Davidson et al. 2018). This context has implications for solidarity, especially how to respond to everyday or institutional racism that occurs within a broader city or even national narrative of 'no problem here'. Here we can return to Heller et al. (2016): pre-Brexit Britain, or Glasgow, can hardly be construed as stable with such racism and anti-immigration practice. Ruth's reflections point to some of this and ways that place comes to be framed around rhetorics of belonging and deservingness, echoing responses to dispersal in the early 2000s.

The intersection of history, memory, and place comes to be embodied in the homework club that Ruth describes. New forms of solidarity are activated through common cause—a need for safe spaces for children in a socio-economically disadvantaged area—but they also chip away at wider inequalities around claims to belonging, and when and where belonging can happen, as well as challenging dominant narratives around deservingness and how these intersect with race, ethnicity, and legal status. This kind of solidarity work is undeniably about immediate needs—of children, parents, schools, neighbourhoods, and communities—but is also embedded in the history of place. Importantly, as Ruth points out, this is community work as critical pedagogy, directly concerned with historical issues around social difference, social justice, and social transformation. Here, small seeds of structural change are being planted in an environment of solidarity that creates a space to question the status quo. The historical and perhaps mythologised '*Glesga activism*' Ruth felt was lacking in Govan can be found elsewhere in new forms, with new Glaswegians, in the homework club and in the *let-ters fae the locals*.



## Conclusion

We can identify action framed around 'help' in Glasgow in the sense of welcome and of receiving aid and support that might be read as depoliticised in its appeal to human-ness. We also find solidarity, of standing with others, of fighting for others, and this draws explicitly from a collective memory of sedimented knowledges around people and place that is politicised. GCP represents quite a specific space and place of solidarity and mobilisation where the reactivation of solidarity has a long history. This can be seen through the experience of Ruth and GCP's emergence from an integration network where knowledges and practices developed became sedimented and crystallized and then reactivated. It's slogan (**Image 1**) symbolizes this reactivation: 'Govan is proudly building again'. GCP's local focus and city-wide reach comes from their longer history of engaging with and challenging Britain's bordering practices. The welcoming narrative that emerged from 2015 did not take hold with GCP and other longer standing and more explicitly political organisations, though as Ruth earlier suggested, they did not shy away from exploiting the moment to effect change.

Refugee not only draws on memory of place specifically, it is central to its existence. The city of Glasgow is embedded in its hybridisation of the refugee/Glaswegian identity. Its *letters fae the locals* campaign (**Image 3**) relies on understanding of place and of sharing experiences of welcome to the city. However, as Selina points out, the organisation did fall into some of the more aid-related and de-politicised practices of the refugee welcome movement. This is not meant as a critical reflection of people motivated to help, or whose knowledge or interest was sparked by the more visible manifestations of refugeeeness on our TV screens in 2015. But it does suggest that temporality matters in how crisis is framed, lived, and responded to. When crisis is framed as spectacular then only those categorised as the product of crisis are worthy of help. Hidden is the unexceptional everyday suffering people face as they try to survive the asylum process and the effects of austerity, struggles which pre-date 2015. Naming this is essential to reframing the spectacular as the routinized crisis long experienced by people seeking asylum. The sustainability of GCP and Refugee, as well as solidarity action across the city, relies heavily on their work and responses *not* being pinned to exceptional 'events', but on continuously drawing 'there' into 'here' and connecting 'here' to 'there'. When exploring solidarity work in context in Glasgow, we can identify a politics of location at play that produces specific forms of action and alliances, themselves inextricably interwoven with history, memory, and place.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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